

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
 Arlington Street Church
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Silence

When I met Brother David Steindl-Rast, he and his Benedictine brothers were living at a lighthouse in Maine, keeping silence for months on end. I was amazed that he would break his silence to come speak to a small group of us in the religion department at Middlebury College — a talk about what he called “the monk in all of us.” I remember being possessed by that *When Harry Met Sally* feeling that I wanted what he was having.

We live in a noisy world. When it’s not noisy, we make it noisy, turning on the TV, NPR, a podcast, music, a movie.... When the house is “too quiet,” we head out to the noisy streets and to whatever noisy place they might take us. We associate noise with sociability. And that’s all good. We’re meant for human contact.

But we’re also meant for silence —
 for the kind of quiet in which questions and answers become clearer,
 the kind of quiet that soothes us and lets us rest,
 the kind of quiet in which wisdom and healing grow.

Dr. Nancy Lynne Westfield, a professor at Drew Theological School, tells a great story from the time historian and activist Dr. Vincent Harding was teaching there. Dr. Harding would ask the class if there were any questions about the readings he had assigned. Several hands would fly up, and Dr. Harding would take the first question. The question would hang in the air, while Dr. Harding sat, thinking, in silence. After a few moments, he would close his eyes, and just sit there, holding the silence. One minute would pass. Two minutes. Sometimes five minutes. Ten minutes.

Dr. Nancy Westfield writes, “The first time I witnessed this, I thought he had fallen asleep.... [but] in time, Dr. Harding would emerge [from] the silence and ... respond to the student’s question.... By mid-semester, he was answering about two

questions per class... by the end of the semester, he would ponder a question for thirty or forty minutes before responding.

At first, Dr. Westfield continues, “students would be restless while Dr. Harding was in silence. After three or four sessions, [though,] there was a shift. During the ... silence, students would still themselves; the ... fidgety-ness was replaced with an air of expectation and wonder. The empty silence was replaced with a full silence. [And when, at last,] the silence was broken by Dr. Harding’s words, students were focused and attentive, waiting for the engagement.”

Dr. Nancy Westfield concludes, “... These silences added a dimension to the [classes] which was a kind of spiritual intangible, ... tapping into [the] meditative, spiritual power [that is] inextricably linked to intellectual [acumen. Dr. Vincent Harding’s] approach disrupts the stale caricatures of ‘teacher as expert’ or ‘the sage of the stage’ for a more authentic experience of wisdom.... When we free ourselves from the illusion of being the ‘fount of information’ who has to rush to answer each question upon demand, ... the ecology of the classroom shifts ... to a place of warmth and liberation.”¹

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As many of you know, the Grand Canyon has been one of Kem’s & my great teachers. Each time we arrive at the rim for our annual pilgrimage, Kem has me close my eyes and leads me to the edge — no peeking! When she says, “Open your eyes!” I am always, always, completely overcome by the beauty and the vastness of that extraordinary landscape, but also by the silence. Later, heading down the trail just after midnight to avoid the worst of the relentless desert heat, the only sound is of our boot soles hitting the dust and the faint creaking of our packs, and perhaps a little dusty wind, stirred up from far below. In that huge silence, my myriad, disparate thoughts settle, and from underneath all the busyness, a sensation surfaces of being exuberantly alive and exquisitely peaceful. In the silence, we can just be.

There’s a long history of walking in silence for personal awakening as well as for social justice. Buddhist teacher Jack Kornfield writes, “Peace walks date from the time of the Buddha and, in modern times, inspired by [Mahatma] Gandhi and Dr. King and Cambodian elder Maha Ghosananda, peace walks have come to hold a special power.

¹ Nancy Lynne Westfield, “Wielding the Power of Silence,” 4/19/16. Please see wabashcenter.typepad.com/stories_from_the_front_of/2016/04/wielding-the-power-of-silence.html

“Peace walks are a practice of steady, loving presence — slow, beautiful and dignified, without flags, placards, or slogans. Instead of shouting in the name of peace, peace is demonstrated by the walk. The silent walkers embody the reality of respect and [peaceful] coexistence. They offer calm, confidence, and a spirit of mindful empathy. They create community among disparate people, uplift spirits, and empower participants to act for peace.”

In the 1970s, student protests against the military dictatorship in Thailand reached a dangerous peak. Jack Kornfield was a Buddhist monk there, then; he writes, “I remember how one morning ... a long line of Buddhist monks and nuns came and stood peacefully between the barricades of students and the military police. Bangkok’s biggest road had been blocked for weeks, government shooting[s] had taken the lives of students, and the conflict was on the verge of spiraling further out of control.

“Barefoot and silent, the line of forest monks and nuns had walked with their abbot for miles, and came to stand, meditatively, in the center of the battlefield, bringing their peaceful hearts to cool the danger.

“After standing for hours, they withdrew [in silence]. But it was enough. Their powerful, compassionate presence turned the tide. Negotiations between the leaders resumed, and the resolution of [the student’s] demands began.”²

Franciscan Friar, Father Richard Rohr, takes a deep bow to this strategy. “At this point in time ... in our society, ... people who are interested in issues of peace and justice surely recognize ... how vocabulary, conversation, and communication have reached a very low point.... It feels like the only way through ... is a re-appreciation for this ... seemingly harmless, ... wonderful thing called silence.”³

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There is something to be said for learning to live our lives not in reaction to everything unfolding and spinning all around us, but from our own center: to cultivate within ourselves a reference point, a still point, from which we can bud and flower and fruit. Meditation is a highway to that place.

² Jack Kornfield at jackkornfield.com/new-york-peace-walk/

³ Thanks to Rev. Ellen Jennings, *Silence*, 10/31/14. Please see cpcchurch.org/sermons/sermon-silence-10-12-14/

My beloved teacher, the Dutch Catholic priest Father Henri J.M. Nouwen, decried what he called the inundation of “a torrent of words,” and exhorted his students to the spiritual practice of silence. “Silence,” he said, “guards the inner [fire] ... of the Holy Spirit within us.”⁴ Father Nouwen used three brief stories from the Desert Fathers in Egypt to illustrate the power of silence.⁵

First, Abbot Macarius, giving the benediction at the close of a service in Scete, said to the congregation, “Brethren, fly!” Afterwards, one of the elders asked him, “How can we fly farther than this, seeing we are here in the desert?” Abbot Macarius put his finger on his mouth and said, “Fly from this.” In other words, stop speaking, and turn within.⁶

Second, “When Arsenius, the Roman educator who exchanged his status and wealth for the solitude of the ... desert, prayed, ‘Lord, lead me into the way of salvation,’ he heard a voice saying, ‘Be silent.’” Later, Arsenius said, “I have often repented of having spoken, but never of having remained silent.”

And a third story from the Desert Fathers: An archbishop came to the desert to visit Abba Pambo, but Abba Pambo did not speak to him. The other brothers urged him to say something, but he replied, “If he is not edified by my silence, he will not be edified by my speech.”⁷

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The psalmist wrote that there is a time for every purpose under heaven: a time to keep silence and a time to speak.⁸ My Episcopal colleague, Rev. Becca Stevens, tells a wonderful story of a young woman who lives at Thistle Farms in Nashville, the residence Becca founded to heal, empower, and employ women who have survived sexual abuse, trafficking, prostitution, and addiction. This woman was traveling to Texas with Becca to tell her story. On the plane — her first time on a plane — she began to get nervous, not about flying, but about her talk. She wrote and rewrote it. That night at the hotel, she skipped dinner, re-writing. Becca read three or four versions.

⁴ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, p. 45

⁵ *ibid*, pp. 35-36

⁶ This story appears in James O. Hannay, *The Wisdom of the Desert*, p. 206

⁷ This story appears in Benedicta Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, p. 69

⁸ Ecclesiastes 3

The next morning, the woman told her, “I [wrote it again] and I want you to hear it...” Becca said, “Dear G*d! You’re amazing! It’s beautiful. It’s perfect!” But the woman became more and more nervous.

When they arrived for the speech, Becca stood to introduce the woman and told the audience, “I think it will go much better for her and for us if we just go ahead, cut to the chase, and give her a standing ovation now.” The woman stood up, and then everyone stood up — stood with her — and began to applaud. The woman wept, and then everyone was crying — as Rev. Becca Stevens described it, “a big lovefest without ... words.” And in the end, the woman’s “words were so much less important than her witness:”⁹ standing up there, saying with her presence, “I survived. You can, too.”

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Beloved spiritual companions,

We were meant for this noisy world, but also for silence.

May we know the silence of Dr. Harding’s classroom,
 the silence of the Grand Canyon,
 the silence of the Egyptian desert,
 the silence of standing, meditatively,
 in the center of the battlefield,
 bringing our peaceful hearts to cool the danger.

Let us seek to replace empty silence with full silence.
 May we know its freedom and power —
 a lovefest without words.

Amen.

⁹ Rev. Becca Stevens, *Be Quiet So That I Can Hear*, 2/13/18. Please see beccastevens.org/blog/silencesermon2018